Brahnaviharas Retreat notes
Tejananda, Vajraloka April—July 1999

Brief overview

The brahmaviharas are metta (maitri in Sanskrit), karuna, mudita and upekkha (upeksa in Sanskrit). Metta is the foundation; karuna & mudita are metta responding to particular conditions. Upekkha is the union of them all, conjoined with insight.

'Brahmavihara' means *'abode* of Brahma'—Brahma being regarded in Buddhist cosmology as the highest mundane being; so we could call brahmaviharas the 'pinnacle of the mundane'. This his how they are generally seen in the Theravada tradition. But it seems quite possible that the Buddha used the term 'Brahmaloka' as a synonym of awakening, *nirvana* itself. This suggests that he taught the brahmaviharas as means to awakening in their own right. They are also known as the '4 *apramanah',* 'the immeasurables', as there's no limit to them, i.e. to the number of objects or scope of metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha.

The Buddha's emphasis on the practice of the Brahmaviharas highlights fact that the transformation of our emotions is a crucial aspect of spiritual life. So important first of all to understand what 'emotion' might mean in Buddhist terms.

'Rectification of terms'

I think in approaching the brahmaviharas it is crucially important to be clear about the distinction between sensation, feeling and emotion—particularly the latter two. I propose to use these terms in quite a specific way, as related to particular Pali / Sanskrit terms.

'Sensation' is here synonymous with *sparsa/phassa*, i.e. as 'sense impression' or 'contact'. A definition of *sparsa* from the Pali canon is: 'Dependent on the [sense organ] and the [object], [a sense]-consciousness arises: the coming-together of the three is **sense impression**.' —E.g. the coming together of feather, skin and mental awareness of a 'tickle' amounts to a unitary experience which we can call a 'sensation'. So, 'sensation' refers to *any* sense-experience that we might have. It doesn't just refer to our sense of touch—sight, hearing, smelling, taste and mental sensing (thoughts, images, emotions etc) are also here included under 'sensations'.

'Feeling' or 'feeling tone' means *vedana.* This refers *just* to the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling which is *inseparably associated with any sense impression*. 'Feeling-tone' is perhaps better as it clearly avoids the usual associations with the word 'feeling' in English. I.e. we're *not* understanding 'feeling' in usual colloquial sense of, for instance, 'I feel angry'—which less colloquially but more accurately means 'I'm emoting anger'. Remember that as senses include the mind—the mental sense—mental activities and emotions also have their own associated feeling-tone or *vedana*, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Note that in the 12 *nidanas* of conditioned arising, sensation and feeling are 'karmacally resultant'—i.e. they are not actively karma-forming in themselves. They so to speak *happen to* us, rather than ourselves making them happen (though we have in the past—and this could include the very recent past—set up conditions which make them 'tend' to happen).

'Emotion' is equivalent to *samskara.* These *are* what we make happen—i.e. volitions/impulses, willings, wantings, wishings, motivations, makings, formings, moods. *Samskaras* are karmically active or formative and can be either *skilful* or *unskilful*. These are represented in the 12 *nidana* chain by tr¿na/tanha, the primary manifestation of delusion in terms of *unskilful samskaras*. However, in principle, this nidana can be taken to represent *samskaras* in general—after 'the gap'. Whether one goes around the cycle of sa¬sara again, or spirals up the augmentative nidanas towards *samadhi* and insight

depends on whether one's *samskara*s are skilful or unskilful ('creative' or 'reactive').

One more definition here: I use ‘positive’ *just* as an equivalent of 'skilful' (*kusala*); and ‘negative’ as equivalent of 'unskilful' (*akusala*)—otherwise these words are open to possible misconstrual if used in the general, rather vague ways that they tend to be by English speakers.

The brahmaviharas (like all meditative states) are kusala samskaras. It's vitally important to be clear that metta and the other brahmaviharas are *not* vedanas (though—a possible source of confusion at first—vedanas will always be present in them, as they are in every experience we have). *Unskilful* samskaras are emotions that arise from delusion, i.e. our more or less compulsive 'unconscious' attractions towards/pulls away from things (unconscious in that we are not really, fully aware when we do it). I.e. craving / aversion and all their derivatives: greed, lust, meanness, irritation, ill-will, anger, jealousy...

At this level—what Sangharakshita refers to as the ‘reactive mind’—we’re just doing what we *want* to do, following the line of least resistance. In contrast to this, the Dhammapada points to what we *need* to do: *'Just as a fletcher makes straight his arrow, so the wise man makes straight his trembling, unsteady citta'* (i.e. equivalent to samskaras). So, we need to learn how to direct & cultivate our samskaras, consciously and deliberately. Which means, firstly, becoming aware of them. When we *have* become aware of them, (which is what we are doing at the beginning of every meditation practice), we can then start working on them & channeling them more creatively. That’s to say, we can explore the unlimited possibilities of the skilful side of our emotionality & discover just how skilful emotions find appropriate expression in the different situations we meet in our lives.

But before we can start to cultivate skilful emotions we need to know what we're actually ‘emoting’ now, already. Gross emotions usually are easy to contact (difficult to avoid!), subtle ones can be more difficult. This is why it’s so important to cultivate overall self-awareness at the beginning of every meditation practice. What this really means is being *receptive* to exactly what is going on in us from moment to moment—in body, mental activities and emotional activities. So, in becoming aware of our *emotional activities* as part of our setting up, we’re not just looking for fully formed 'emotional states'—that is, moods—but also for slighter or more subtle emotional impulses that may be arising—for example, things that we're wishing for, or wanting to do. A desire to move a hand or scratch an itch is an emotional activity too. What we tend to think of as 'emotional states' are simply a 'cloud' or continuum of such volitions—entrenched samskaras. So working with our emotions means going deeper into ourselves—contacting *what we really are emoting* and then *working from where we are*—with hindrances or dhyana factors, whatever the case may be, in the brahmaviharas.

Points on Metta bhavana (Most of these points apply to all the brahmaviharas)

As we've seen, metta, like the other brahmaviharas, is a positive emotion—a skilful (*kusala*) samskara. Bearing in mind the distinction between vedanas and samskaras, what we need to avoid doing when practising the metta bhavana the 'feelgood bhavana'—i.e. trying to cultivate pleasant or 'nice' feelings /*vedanas* in relation to self and other people. As should be clear from the above, it is not even possible to cultivate vedanas directly, which is why people attempting to do so can end up in strange, or at least strained states.

As a *samskara*, metta naturally has particular characteristics. As regards the meaning of the word, in Sanskrit, maitri is ultimately derived from 'mitra' which in turn comes from the root *mith* 'to unite, pair, couple, meet (as friend or antagonist)'. 'Mitra' has the former association: 'a friend, companion, associate'. An alternative form of *mitra*, found in compound words, is *maitra* which has the associations of 'coming from or given by or belonging to a friend, friendly, amicable, benevolent, affectionate, kind'. From this is

derived maitri—'friendship, friendliness, benevolence, good will'. (Definitions from Monier-Williams' Sanskrit dictionary). Metta is the Pali (prakrit, i.e. a colloquial) form, derived from the Pali equivalent of mitra, i.e. mitta, derived also from *maitra*. In the PED, the definition is 'love, amity, sympathy, friendliness, active interest in others'.

As we are aware metta, as a brahmavihara, has a number of specific characteristics, i.e. it embodies the qualities of the definitions above, characteristic of friendliness, and is disinterested and limitless (*apramana*—viz the alternative name for the brahmaviharas, the *4 apramanah* or 'illimitables').

Note that the basis of metta is friend*liness,* not friend*ship*—i.e. we are training ourselves to be *friendly* to all beings, not to think in terms of 'all beings could actually be my friend', (which they can't—but which seems to be a consideration that some people bring to working the practice, especially with the neutral person). 'Limitless' means that, if we are giving rise to the quality, it will be expressed towards whoever we happen to meet or think about, without exception.

'Disinterested' means that it is not affected in any way by the biases that arise from craving, aversion or delusion. This is the rationale behind working to cultivate it in relation to a friend (in order to express metta irrespective of any craving or attachment), neutral person (to counter indifference) and enemy (to counter hatred).

The main point which arises from this is that metta (like the other brahmaviharas) is *completely independent of pleasure or pain* (or indifference). It's very important to be clear that positive emotions such as metta and the other brahmaviharas are *samskaras*—volitions—and *not pleasant feelings*. They tend to be *associated* with pleasant vedanas—especially as you get into dhyana, e.g. *sukha*—but you can be *expressing* a positive emotion even while experiencing unpleasant *vedanas*—e.g. being kind to someone when you have a headache or a cold. It is not dependent on 'feeling good'—i.e. feeling good about oneself or the other people.

A related misdirection people often take when doing metta bhavana is to think that unless they have some kind of *powerful* experience—emotion or vedana—it isn't really metta and they have 'failed' to do the practice properly. This partly arises from a confusion of the *objective or ideal* of fully developed metta, with the *practice* of cultivating it (bhavana). What we're doing, of course, is the cultivation, the metta bhavana. If we're too orientated to the ideal (or *idea*, more likely) of metta it can lead to straining—trying to force ourselves to be *where we are not*, rather than working from where we are. I also tend to think—personally—that using 'love' or even 'loving-kindness' too indiscriminately as a way of talking about metta can set up tendencies for this kind of strain, even if those teaching the practice are careful about how they use the word in this context and mention all the usual provisos. As we've seen, the primary meaning of maitri is friendliness, benevolence, goodwill. Qualities such as these are probably more accessible as they're already likely to be in our experience—certainly in our general life experience, even if they are not present at this very moment—whereas if we have the idea 'I must *love* myself and others' in the practice—we might find that we are setting our sights too high, or just can't *relate* to the quality.

We are very unlikely to go wrong if we always aim to start the metta bhavana on the foundation of *whatever* positive emotions are already going on, are present now. Even if it's just the tiniest trickle of friendliness, kindness, goodwill, well-wishing, emotional warmth. These qualities are all 'constitutive' of metta—essentially we're working to make these very qualities our invariable response in thoughts, words and deeds, to ourselves and others, whoever they are. Its ok, indeed normal, if the positive emotions begin in a very low-key sort of way in the practice—after all, it's the *bhavana* of metta i.e. a *process* —a gradual build up to stronger and more consistent expression of those qualities.

It's helpful, then, in setting up for a metta practice, (i.e. setting up broad awareness) to relax and be open and receptive to whatever positive (skilful) impulses or emotions that are already there (everyone has experience of expressing positive emotion—friendliness, kindness, etc). For example, having developed broad ('receptive') awareness at the beginning of the practice, then start the 'activity' by being open to or looking for qualities such as: in your body— lightness, ease, stability, a sense of openness. (These are not necessarily skilful samskaras in themselves, but very useful general factors for meditation and concentration). In your mental activities—clarity, lucidity, calm (also you can look for the beginnings of *vitakka* and *vicara*). In your emotions—kindness**,** friendliness, goodwill, well-wishing—here, with the emotions, we're definitely looking for genuine (albeit maybe very slight and subtle) skilful emotions that are either present already, or just 'below the surface'.

Through the whole metta bhavana practice—both setting up and the stages—it's very important to *keep in contact* with *whatever* emotions are arising. I.e. keep in contact with, or keep coming back to, your overall self-awareness. Check what effect the work you've done so far has had on your emotions and adjust your approach if necessary in the light of that awareness—i.e. if skilful emotions are happening already, build on them, if not, work to cultivate them, apply appropriate antidotes to hindrances & use usual methods of evoking metta. Aim *always* to know where you are and to work from there. —At least 'check-into' your broad awareness between stages of practice, but ideally, for experienced meditators, from moment-to-moment.

Working in the stages in metta bhavana

Stage 1 can be approached in two main ways, according to 'where we're at'

a) see it as cultivating metta 'towards' ourselves

- from scratch if we haven't got any skilful *samskara*s going yet
- on basis of the kindness etc present if these are already there.

b) if there is a basis of kindness etc already present, can see it not so much as cultivating metta *to self* as simply cultivating metta—'in' ourselves, but potentially towards all.

Stages 2, 3 & 4 enable us to work on our basic *deluded* responses to others: i.e. we respond to people we like with pleasure, neutral people with indifference and difficult people with ill-will or hatred.

Stage 2: The main challenge with the friend it to convert our *pema*—affection mingled with friendliness and an element of attachment—into non-attached friendly affection. We have a natural 'warm' response to a friend (don't choose a friend who you're currently having difficulties with for this stage—this is stage 4 stuff)—so just emphasise the warmth, affection, well-wishing, kindness which should just be there and let go of the attachment / partiality. We can spend time learning to *distinguish* the distinctive emotional quality of attachment (which usually wants something from the friend—i.e. it's not disinterested) from the straightforward kindness/well-wishing.

Stage 3: If metta is cultivated, this shouldn't be a problem—you just continue to cultivate it while bearing this person in mind. If metta isn't yet cultivated, this stage can show you quite 'brutally' where you're really at—that you're actually quite indifferent to this or any neutral person (e.g. this may well become clear if you've merely been cultivating 'nice feelings' in relation to your friend—fantasizing, etc.) What to do if this is the case? Go back to cultivating *contentment* on the basis of accepting that, for the moment, this *is* where you're at. Then recall confidence/enthusiasm/kindness and go back to the person again. Keep trying!

Stage 4: The advantage with this stage is that you'll probably find some energy if this has been lacking before! I find it useful to reflect—having contacted the ill-will in me towards this person—'I don't *want* to have ill-will—it does me harm'. There will probably be some

degree of ‘hurt’ around which the ill-will centres. This is just an unpleasant vedana—recognize it as such. The important thing to realize is that *we don’t have to react to hurt with hatred*. Recognize that we have a choice. We can respond with ill-will, or we can cultivate metta. It helps to see the person in perspective—reflect on their good sides, their suffering, that they act in way they do for reasons and may be engendering suffering for themselves (these considerations are brought out more fully in the other brahmaviharas).

Stage 5: Give the ‘equalising’ part it’s due—it's easy to rush over it, but it is the basis for what follows. In the last ‘spreading’ part, don’t get caught up in fantasies about the vastness of the universe. What you are doing here really is developing a consistent and sustained expression of the brahmavihara of metta ‘in yourself’ which, in principle, would find expression towards anyone or any being whatever who you happened to think of or encounter. This is what ‘universal’ and ‘unlimited’ really mean. However, this isn’t to say that you can't use your imagination in the more ‘cosmic’ way if you find it useful. Some find it helpful, rather than thinking of their metta ‘going out’ to all beings (which can make it seem a bit thin), to imagine the beings ‘in here’—in your own heart, for example. This helps highlight the fact that the metta itself is the main focus of the practice—you’re developing it in yourself with the aim of being able to express in, in everyday life, simply to anyone you meet. It’s not *literally* spread all over the universe—this is just a means of cultivating it, which may work for some but not for others. Be flexible and do whatever actually tends to make you feel more generally friendly to more people!

Karuna bhavana

As we know, metta is the basis of all other brahmaviharas. If we're cultivating metta, then karuna *and* mudita are the natural response to particular circumstances that we encounter, i.e.— karuna is metta responding to pain, suffering, unskilful acts. Mudita is metta responding to pleasure, happiness, skilful acts. In the bhavana practices, karuna and mudita are both responses which arises from *contemplating* people in such circumstances, while simultaneously cultivating metta.

Karuna: Kamalashila writes: ‘compassion is the desire to relieve the suffering of another person so that they may be happy’. It's clear from this that karuna is an activity, a volition *(samskara)* & not a feeling (*vedana*). If we *just* sympathetically 'felt' someone else's pain (i.e. their vedana), it's probable that we'd just get into one of the near enemies of karuna, horrified anxiety or sentimentality, which are inappropriate and ineffective responses. Karuna, by contrast, finds both ***active*** and ***appropriate*** expression. By cultivating this quality through the karuna bhavana, we’re creating conditions (i.e. *setting up a tendency towards particular skilful samskaras*) through which, when we *do* encounter suffering, we’ll be able to respond appropriately—with genuine compassion.

Because the karuna bhavana involves looking directly at people's difficulties & suffering, it's especially important to start it on the basis of actively, continuously, cultivating skilful mental states. If your metta isn't fully up and running yet, start karuna bhavana on basis of whatever emotional positivity you can contact when you begin the practice, e.g. kindness, friendliness, goodwill, well-wishing, benevolence etc. In order to achieve this, paying full attention to setting up **is** very important, including intentions: ongoing (broad) self-awareness; contentment, confidence, enthusiasm, kindness, etc. Until some degree of metta or at least emotional positivity arises in the practice, it is advisable to continue cultivating metta rather than attempting to cultivate karuna.

Working principle of the karuna bhavana: you’re cultivating metta—skilful, positive mental states are actively arising—and with that as the basis you contemplate or 'look directly' at the fact of suffering—a particular person's experience of it. The essence is working to allow *awareness of suffering* to be present in your experience *simultaneously with* the metta/ skilful mental states that you're cultivating. This sets up a kind of 'creative tension' or 'alchemy' and from that the distinct quality or flavour of karuna arises. Once

karuna has arisen, you continue to work directly with that. The thought which embodies karuna would be to the effect of 'may you be free from suffering'.

So on the one hand you need constantly to be working to find ways to maintain metta while vividly being aware of unsatisfactoriness, pain etc. On the other, you need to be working to ensure that you're not falling into any of the usual habits or reactions that you may tend to get into when you come up against suffering, e.g.:

? ‘it's their fault’ (related to contempt)
? cutting off or distancing yourself (both are forms of denial, related to horrified anxiety)
? sense of superiority (often related to a sentimental attitude.)

Probably you will find some of these patterns are very ingrained and habitual. So it's important in karuna bhavana to be ‘scanning’ through your experience, especially your emotional experience, all the time for the possible arising of these tendencies (they may have arisen without your noticing it).

The far enemy of karuna: Cruelty. If we think we'd never have cruel thoughts, this practice can be a shock. We need to take ‘where we are now’ into account and be honest about our present emotions—without ceasing to develop self-metta. This is an important aspect of becoming self-aware.

Near enemies: a) Sentimentality: 'Oh you *poooor* thing' etc. This often involves an element of attachment or projection. We can't necessarily just make it go away, so need to *acknowledge* it's there and work to concentrate on the fact of the person's suffering and your own genuine, skilful motivations of friendliness and kindness towards them.

b) Horrified anxiety: if the suffering is too much for you, best to choose, for time being, a person whose suffering is less extreme. Horrified anxiety may especially be a problem in final stage. It may be appropriate to bring to mind 'balancing' thoughts of mudita if this arises.

According to Bhante: ‘karuna is your kindness with a shadow cast upon it’— it's sobering—but doesn't alter your care and kindness. In fact, if brings it more to the fore.

The karuna bhavana practice

First, develop overall self-awareness—aware of immediate intentions—contentment, confidence and enthusiasm. Then look for kindness, friendliness etc already going on, or start cultivating it.

1. Getting in touch with metta. Not *just* metta ‘towards yourself’, but metta that is *potentially towards everyone*. Work to get metta to permeate your consciousness, so that it's just there—it's ‘in and towards yourself’, but if you brought anyone else to mind, it'd be there for that person (or being) too. Work to cultivate metta as seems most appropriate—work with whatever you can actually give rise to—a little trickle of warm well wishing is better than *straining* for 'total universal metta' that isn't at the moment even remotely accessible.

2. A suffering person. Someone you know (or know of) who has some kind of suffering or pain—physical, emotional, social—to which you can easily relate and empathise. It could be someone who doesn't have any major ‘objective’ suffering but gives themself a hard time. Don't judge whether they 'should' be suffering. It' s enough just that they are.

But *beware* of choosing someone whose suffering's so extreme that you can't handle it—could give rise to despondency or horrified anxiety. The purpose is to *cultivate* karuna—so it's best to start gently with something you *can* handle. It's especially important in karuna bhavana to work *from where you are.* You can't *start* with karuna—you may not yet know exactly what karuna really is. What you have to do is just engage with the practice—the bhavana process—and in time karuna will emerge or ‘click’ for you.

Start with metta towards them. When the metta is firm, bring to mind their suffering and allow your metta to respond (you can work in this way in every stage).

Constantly be aware of what's happening in your own mind as you do the practice—is it tending towards horror, or sentimentality? Does the sense of the suffering person tend to fade away?

3. A good friend: Just bring to mind fact that your friend *can* suffer. With a close friend, there's usually a mix between self-interest and metta. There usually *will* be an element of attachment there (i.e. *pema*). You need to be aware of that and work to put it aside, so you can develop kindness and compassion which is there just for them, independent of you.

4. Neutral person. The difficulty here is that you don't really know anything about them (probably). But in light of the Buddha's First Truth—dukkha—can reflect that they inevitably must experience suffering. Work in the same way.

5. Difficult person. The obvious pitfall here is cruelty—you may *enjoy* the thought of their suffering (schadenfreude). A possible way of counteracting this is to be aware or reflect: 'I experience difficulties/pain, they also experience difficulties/pain, just the same', etc. In this way may get a little insight into why they behave as they do. So you just have in mind *their* difficulties and *your* sense of kindness and skilful intentions. Be careful not to wander into a blaming or patronising attitude (or of course, plain ill-will).

6. a) Equalise: Bring to mind all the previous people—yourself this time, the suffering person, friend, neutral person and difficult person. Be aware: all equally suffer, all equally just wish to be happy. Work to eradicate any *biases* towards or away from any of these people—i.e. biases that hinder your response to them from being real metta or karuna, i.e. without self-interest.

b) Make it all-inclusive/ limitless: In whatever ways you find effective, bring your karuna to include all beings, in vivid awareness of their suffering or potential suffering.

Mudita Bhavana

Mudita is 'taking delight in others' happiness & good qualities' i.e. sympathetic joy—very much like rejoicing in merits (*anumodana,* which comes from the same Sanskrit root). Karuna generally focuses on the darker sides of life, while mudita focuses on the brighter more positive and skilful sides. They are a necessary balance to each other. Mudita also counteracts one of the near enemies of karuna—gloom or horrified anxiety. The two main objects of mudita are people's **happiness** and in their **positive qualities**.

1. Happiness: We can cultivate sympathetic joy in any pleasure or happiness that does not have an unskilful cause. So, in the first place, we can rejoice in people's ordinary, everyday happinesses or pleasures—that they should be happy to be on holiday, to have a satisfying job, to see good friends or relatives and so on. One thing we should be discriminating about, though: we can't develop mudita if the person *appears* to be happy as a result of unskilful acts, e.g. because you've got a really good hi-fi system really cheap because it 'fell off the back of a lorry'.

It's important to be aware of the distinction which can be made, from a Buddhist point of view, between *happiness* and *pleasure*. We could—most of us do to some extent or other—try to set up our lives in such a way that we're surrounded by people and things which give us pleasure (including the pleasure of security). Probably most of us most of the time think of happiness in terms of experiencing pleasure. But in itself pleasure is, of course, very fragile and undependable. It's not a good idea to set up your whole life in the pursuit of pleasure. Things that we set up in this way can easily be lost, or become objects of obsessive attachment. What we could call *real* happiness arises from who and what we are—that is, from the skilful mental states we've cultivated. Implicit in this truer kind of happiness is a feeling that—somehow or other—we're realizing our potential as a human being, or at least are beginning to. Happiness is 'progressive'—it's to do with active skilful volitions. Pleasure, on the other hand, tends to be relatively passive—it's a result process,

a vipaka. (But of course, there is also great pleasure in ‘real happiness’.) So to realise real happiness, it’s not enough to depend on past merit—we need to be actively creating new skilful actions and tendencies all the time. For mudita bhavana, then, we can rejoice in such happiness to the extent that we can see it in ourselves or others.

2. Positive qualities: By 'positivity', as I explained before, I mean 'skilful mental states' and actions through which we express them or cultivate them. You don’t necessarily have to know a person really well to get some impression of their positive qualities—you just have to be aware of them, in an appreciative—mettaful—sort of way, and at least some of their positive qualities will probably begin to become evident. But it’s important that we develop a broad idea of what 'positivity' is. People are very different from one another. We may find we have a tendency to rejoice most in qualities which are like our own. We have to learn to see through others’ eyes, so to speak and appreciate as positive, positive qualities which are not *our* positive qualities!

Sometimes find people having rather superficial idea of what 'being positive' is (e.g. mistaking it for extroversion), such as:

? constantly smiling at everyone and everything all the time; (in a mahayana sutra there’s the exhortation ‘always to greet others first and smile while you are speaking’—but not to be taken literally, i.e. it means being consciously outwardgoing and positive towards people, not literally smiling all the time, which would give you jaw-ache!)
? being manically energetic, getting lots & lots of things done (and resenting those who apparently aren't)
? being totally optimistic under all circumstances whatever (& the more disastrous, the better)

Of course, these kinds of actions *may* be expressions of skilful mental states—if they are, we can certainly rejoice in them; and if they're not, we can at least rejoice in the good intentions behind them. (It is important to acknowledge and appreciate people’s good intentions, even if their expression is clumsy or even irritating!)

In cultivating mudita, we need to appreciate that sometimes even people with highly positive qualities don’t *necessarily* come across in 'out front' sorts of ways. People can be exemplifying positive qualities which aren't outwardly obvious at all—for instance, ones which shine forth in very difficult circumstances—patience, forbearance, integrity, steadfastness, non-reactivity—working with difficulties & not letting them overpower you. So we can rejoice in *whatever* skilful, positive qualities we see in people—friendliness, warmth, kindness, encouragement, generosity, helpfulness, energy ‘in pursuit of the good’, mindfulness, awareness of others, being a good listener, perceptiveness, self-knowledge, honesty, ethical integrity, patience, sensitivity—just to mention a few. If we see that someone is organising and orienting their life around awakening—in other words, that they are going for refuge—we can certainly rejoice in this without reservation.

The Far Enemy of mudita: resentment or envy—or, turned upside-down (and depending on your particular psychology) it can take the form of unfavourable comparison of oneself with others. What we need to do if we compare ourselves unfavourably is to develop a deeper appreciation of our own qualities and more metta. Not necessarily 'self metta'—just metta. & reflect on the fact that there’s nothing to be gained from comparing oneself with others. Also, be open to others’ rejoicing *in us*. The more self-appreciation we have, the easier it is to appreciate others’ qualities. It’s quite heroic to be able to rejoice fully—without reservation—in others’ qualities, because we’re putting other before self: it's a sort of egolessness. This suggests the potential insight element in mudita. Mudita, too, is something that needs *to be expressed*—that will increase it. It's good to take the risk & rejoice openly in others’ qualities, frequently!

The near enemy of mudita: vicarious satisfaction. You can appreciate the person's good qualities in a sense, but it’s reflected on and through you because you’re emotionally

associated with that person. This includes things like guru worship, hero worship, name-dropping, being hangers-on or groupies. Also the way some parents try to fulfill themselves vicariously through their children—expecting them to take a particular direction in life, fulfilling the parents' expectations. It can be the case too in relation to spiritual friends—putting them on a pedestal. If we do, it's likely that we'll sooner or later knock them off it (and blame them into the bargain!) According to Bhante, 'if you see someone as more than human, it really means you're seeing them as less than human'.—You want them to be 'up there', perfect, ideal, because it suits *you* that they should be like that.

Another near enemy: Flattery. Insincere 'praise' of a person done to get what you want from them (which might well be for them to flatter you back).

Summary: In mudita bhavana we need to be open to people's qualities and happiness on all levels, all the way from conventional good qualities and the happiness that comes from that (even the pleasure that comes from what appears as 'good fortune'), right through to selfless acts and the happiness which arises from distinctly spiritual qualities, including from the arising of insight. This suggests a rough 'hierarchy' with regard to the degree to with which we may be able to evoke sympathetic joy unequivocally. At the 'lowest' level, would be a person's experience of pleasure, then happiness which arises from skilful actions, then positive qualities and skilful actions themselves, and then living a life which is set upon awakening. Each successive one can, of course, include all the preceding ones.

The mudita bhavana practice:

1. Metta—as in first stage of karuna bhavana .

2. A 'boon Companion': someone who you know who's very emotionally positive or skilfully happy or engaged in skilful activities. This is someone who its *easy* to develop the quality of mudita towards—preferably a friend, someone you know personally, but it doesn't have to be—e.g. it could be Bhante, even though you don't necessarily know him very well personally you may be able to rejoice straightforwardly in his good qualities. The 'boon companion' doesn't have to be *perfect*—it's enough for them to have skilful qualities that you can unreservedly rejoice in at the moment. Metta coming into contact with your appreciative feelings for a boon companion naturally becomes mudita.

3. Good friend: focus just on the happiness and good qualities of your friend.

4. Neutral person: There's usually something that can give you a lead-in here. May be enough just to rejoice (e.g.) in the fact that they're a practising Buddhist. This suggests that it's better here to choose someone who isn't *totally* neutral.

5. Difficult person: Try to see him/her more broadly, in more balanced way—i.e. our awareness of the 'bad' side is there, but need to put our energy into being aware of and rejoicing in whatever good we do see, or know about in that person.

6. Equalise/spread: Be aware of the 'upside' of the human race. Be aware of *any* good in people, however 'ordinary'—e.g. kindness to their own children, friendliness; just whatever skilfulness there is, however stumbling, inadequate or compromised by the circumstances in which they find themselves. (Be careful not to be subtly condescending about people who aren't Buddhists—we don't have a monopoly of skilfulness and positivity, in fact we're fundamentally the same as most human beings with all our virtues and faults.) Just emphasise and rejoice in all the happiness and good in the world. As regards animals, probably we can at least be happy that they seem to experience pleasure.

Upekkha Bhavana

Upekkha (upeksha) is the most subtle, but also most sublime and far-reaching of the brahmaviharas. Compared with the others, it can be quite demanding to get the hang of it. This is partly because the practice is relatively complex, compared with the others—there are quite a number of things to bear in mind. It's also because there isn't that much in our

ordinary everyday experience that gives a real idea of upekkha—we may therefore tend to relate it to its near enemy of cool or blank indifference. In fact, it couldn't be more different!

Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhimagga* describes how to cultivate upekkha in this way: *'emerge from the third jhana and reflect on the danger of metta, karuna & mudita, because with their attention to beings' happiness, "resentment and approval are near*". We don't have to take this regarding the third jhana literally - upekkha can be cultivated effectively as long as you are clear of the gross hindrances - but Buddhaghosha's comment does make it clear that: a) Upekkha is *subtler* than the other brahmaviharas. b) The arousing of upekkha involves an element of reflection—not just into the relative inferiority of the other brahmaviharas—it goes further as we'll see. Buddhaghosa is also implying that upekkha avoids hindrances which are particular to metta, karu¢a and mudita, i.e. 'resentment (mudita: jealousy) and approval (metta: partiality; or karu¢a: sentimentality)'.

As a brahmavihara, upekkha is distinct from (but related to) two other senses in which the word is used:

? a state of basic 'equality' of mind, or non-reactiveness with regard to people and things you like, dislike and feel neutral about (this is often referred to in Tibetan *lam rim* sources)

? a synonym for the awakened state.

Upekkha as a brahmavihara comes in between these two, and provides a link between them. We could say—tentatively—that even more than the other brahmaviharas upekkha may give us some sense of the nature of awakened compassion. 'Equanimity' doesn't do upekkha justice. No word does. We can only discover the 'meaning' of upekkha directly, for ourselves by cultivating the quality.

So, let's try to get more of an impression of what upekkha is about. Metta is the basis of all the brahmaviharas in that the others are (so to speak) *potential* in it. With metta we're cultivating a strong volition/wish that we and others 'may be happy and free from suffering'. Then we contemplate how people actually are. Often see our wish is not being fulfilled: we see suffering where we wish people to be happy and free from suffering. The emotion that results is karu¢a. On the other hand, we may see that our heartfelt wish *is* being fulfilled: i.e. we see people's happiness and positive, skilful qualities & resulting joy is mudita. This is how karu¢a and mudita are *potential* in metta.

With upekkha on other hand, we could say that metta, karu¢a and mudita are all *implicit* in it—i.e. they are all, fully there, integrally & equally, as elements of upekkha. In addition, an element of *reflection on conditioned arising* is integral to the cultivation of upekkha. We need to work to make at least a *connection* with the implications of conditioned arising in this practice for upekkha proper to arise.

Why is this necessary? Upekkha is characterised both by profound positivity and by non-reactivity. The positivity comes from the fact that metta, karuna and mudita are all equally there in it. The non-reactivity comes from seeing—getting a *feeling* for—the fact that the pleasure or pain and so on that we're aware of in ourselves and others isn't *ultimate,* it isn't the whole picture. Rather, it arises in dependence on conditions, like all things - any particular pleasure or pain just arises and passes away. If we can really connect with this truth, we tend to become less caught up in our responses of craving and aversion to our own and others' happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain, skilfulness and unskilfulness. By freeing up from these reactions, we're able to develop a degree of 'positive detachment'. This means an emotional *engagement* which is exclusively positive (not to be confused with some kind of emotional non-involvement or alienation). What we're 'detached' from is our reactions of craving, aversion and indifference which usually get in the way of our full, positive emotional engagement with people.

This means that if we embodied & expressed upekkha we'd be steadfast and non-reactive

in the face of whatever suffering or joy we encounter. In other words, we'd constantly be able to respond appropriately because *all* the brahmaviharas would be implicit in our response, and at the same time there wouldn't be any tendency to get caught up in our own subjective (ego) reactions to what is going on. So we could provisionally define upekkha as a complete non-reactiveness in the face of all the ups and downs in our experience, which is completely permeated by unwavering emotional positivity. The 'ups and downs' of our life are the 'worldly winds' which blow us around all the time- i.e. pleasure/pain; gain/loss; praise/blame; repute/disrepute (or 'fame/infamy').

To do the practice, we first of all strongly cultivate metta & allow it to respond appropriately to whatever 'ups and downs' we see in ourselves and others (i.e. as karu¢a and mudita). Then we develop an awareness that the worldly winds that blow people about and their positive qualities (skilfulness) and negative qualities (unskilfulness) are just *part* of a process—they're not, in themselves, the whole picture. In this way, we're getting a broader perspective on things. This is in contrast to what we generally do—i.e. tend to identify completely with whatever is happening at the moment—whether we're 'up' or 'down', and react with craving or averson.

So if we were really imbued with upekkha our response to life would be heartfelt and completely free of reactivity—we'd respond to situations from the heart, without reserve, but unswayed by the biases that usually make our reactions to events unpredictable, even if our intentions are good. For instance, if we encountered something dreadful—an atrocity or a bad accident—we wouldn't *recoil* (out of aversion) & because of this, our response would be much, much more effective. Or, on the side of pleasure and happiness, we might be enjoying and rejoicing in the most wonderful company—but when the time came to part we'd just move on—we wouldn't try to cling to the experience.

So in the practice, you work, while cultivating metta, to see and respond to people as a whole including all their ups and downs - how they're blown about by worldly winds. But don't see them as *just* up or *just* down. See them as a whole - which means as a process. In this way we see these experiences in context - they are just conditioned arisings. This leads to the realization that there's no point in getting upset or intoxicated about any particular 'down' or 'up' because: a) it's only a small aspect of the whole picture, and b) It's just a a process, an arising, a temporary manifestation - selfless, impermanent and unsatisfactory, like everything else. So, you're bearing this in mind. At the same time, metta, karuna and mudita are always fully there in your response to the other person (or yourself).

Upekkha is, quite simply, the most profound level of human positivity. This is why it's the brahmavihara *par excellence.*

The far enemy of upekkha is a cold, deliberate indifference or 'ignoring' (actually a form of aversion or hatred). The near enemy is a kind of dull indifference where you have no real involvement with what's happening. Lack of involvement, abstraction. Or a sort of complacency 'It's ok, everything's perfect just as it is, there's nothing to do or worry about'.

The practice

We work in this following way in *all* the stages:

1. Cultivate metta - bring person to mind

2 a. Bring to mind the person's 'downs'/unskilfulnesses —metta will tends towards karuna.

2 b. Bring to mind their 'ups'/skilfulnesses—metta will tend towards mudita.

2 c. Work towards a 'whole' impression or sense of the person *inculding* all their ups and downs *while still cultivating metta*—allowing it to respond to that 'whole' impression.

(Work towards dispensing with 2 a. and b. - i.e. seeing the person as a whole including ups and downs directly.)

3. Bring in the reflection or awareness that these experiences *have arisen in dependence on prior conditions*. Any particular 'up' or 'down' isn't the whole picture - in itself, it's just a conditioned arising, a transitory phenomenon.

The stages:

1. Metta to/in self. *Or* from the beginning—if metta is there—you can develop upekkha towards your own ups and downs.

2. Neutral person: take this person next because a neutral person doesn't provoke strong reactions of attachment or aversion in us. - so we're less likely to be depressed by their 'downs' and elated by their 'ups'. This gives 'best chance' to contact initial sense of equanimity.

3. Good friend

4. 'Difficult' person.

5. Equalise upekkha to all & then take out to all beings, in the light of the same reflections, regardless of your subjective reactions to them.

Brahmaviharas as vipassana bhavana (insight practices)

Briefly, 'insight cultivation' (vipassana bhavana) refers to any practice which leads to clearer, direct, experiential awareness and knowledge of 'the way things really are'. We cultivate insight by bringing our steady, full awareness to any aspect of the way things really are - for example, the three marks of conditioned existence (anicca, impermanence; dukkha, unsatisfactoriness or suffering; anatta, 'not-self') or paticcasamuppada, conditioned arising; or shunyata, emptiness, and so on. The arising of insight is *not* the same thing as 'stream entry' - practising the Dharma is a process of giving rise to insights all the time. The arising of insight may occasionally be of a dramatic nature, but usually it is a gradual gentle process, e.g. as Bhante has described it in the image of tiny specks of dust falling on one side of a pair of scales. Each 'speck' of insight that arises has in itself a tiny effect, but the specks build up and have a cumulative effect. So for us, the cultivation and arising of insight means this gradual penetration into or clarification of the way things really are, which leads to a loosening of our grasping, clinging and attachment to self/others/posessions, and to a sense of liberation, openness and freedom.

Before the point of irreversibility from awakening (i.e. stream entry), arisings of insight are temporary and reversible (it's as if we keep blowing the 'dust' off the scales). But if we cultivate insight steadily and methodically - using all the opportunities that our life and Dharma practice presents us with - our insightfulness will build up, gain momentum and ultimately result in irreversibility from awakening, and indeed awakening itself.

So, it is very important to be aware of the insight element or potential in all the practices which we do. In some practices, the insight element is explicit, in others it is implicit. Regarding the brahmaviharas, we could say that in the first three, the insight element is more implicit, and in the fourth, it is more explicit.

How is the insight element implicit in metta, karuna and mudita?

a) All three of these brahmaviharas involve going beyond our normal view that what we regard as 'I' or 'me' (or as 'my me') is more important than anyone else's 'I' or 'me'. We work on this deeply held wrong view most directly in the 'equalising' part of the last stage, where we see 'my-self' as no more (or less) worthy of metta, karuna or mudita than the 'myself' of others. Then, when we become aware of all other beings in the second part of

the stage, we may be more able to see 'our' self as just one among innumerable other 'selves' to which the brahmavihara is being cultivated. This tends to reduce our sense of 'self-importance', but at 'the same time, because we have no less metta (etc.) for ourselves than for others, we don't fall into the extreme of 'annihilating' ourselves (we *are* part of the picture - just not at the centre of the universe). 'So, seeing ourselves in this way tends to reduce our 'self-grasping' or 'grasping at a 'self'.
b) Insight is also implicit, particularly, in what we're doing in the stages concerning the friend, neutral person and 'enemy'. That is, we 'are working to see through and not act upon our normal deluded ego-reactions of: liking/grasping what gives us pleasure (friends); 'being indifferent to/ignoring what doesn't give us either pleasure or pain (neutral people); and disliking/creating aversion towards what gives us pain (enemies or dificult people).

So, in these stages, we're very actively letting go of these ego-reactions - craving, indifference, aversion - in order to see the person just as they are, independent of our projecting 'friend', 'neutral person' or 'enemy' onto them. In this way, our metta, karuna or mudita for them will be as 'clear', 'pure', 'unadulterated' or 'unbiased' as possible. It's also worth bearing in mind that when we wish 'may you be happy' (or its subtle or imaginative equivalent), what we are really wishing is that they should awaken; because if we only wish them 'worldly 'happiness', then this is inseparable from wishing them in effect 'worldly unhappiness' (as the two go in effect hand in hand as far as the dualistic, unawakened mind is concerned). Ordinary happiness or pleasure is of course impermanent and reversible. So don't hold back! Wish people the highest happiness of insight and the awakening that takes them ultimately beyond dukkha.

A final consideration: if we approached the first three brahmaviharas as 'samatha' practices alone, they would be, ultimately, ineffective: we'd cultivate metta, karuna and mudita, but we wouldn't be dealing with the main obstruction to embodying and expressing these qualities at their highest possible level - i.e. our self or ego-orientation, our 'self-view'. In the longer term, without cultivating insight and realising 'irreversibility, our expression of the brahamviharas will always be compromised by being dependent on the moods which characterise the 'ordinary worldling's' mind - i.e. it will depend in effect on whether we happen to be in a good mood, a bad mood or a 'brahmavihara-y' sort of mood. So it is only with irreversible insight - that moment when in Bhante's image the dust on one scale makes it - imperceptibly - begin to dip below the other - that the skilful mental states embodied by the brahmaviharas also becomes irreversible.

So, this is what we aspire to - in our Dharma practice in general, and in our practice of the brahmaviharas on this retreat in particular (as well as after of course): insight - ireversible insight - is explicitly our goal. Awakening is our goal. But we don't have to worry about irreversibility: this will arise - will only arise - if we use the opportunities we have got now to *cultivate* insight. What we can do now, in our practice of the first three brahmaviharas, then, is to bear these insight possibilities or elements in mind - be aware that just by thoroughly putting ourselves into the practices, we are implicitly cultivating both samatha and vipassana.